

From the New Deal to the Green New Deal

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Version of July 2020

Abstract:

A Green New Deal is the best way within the current political economic system of dealing with climate change, social inequality, economic malperformance and political disintegration in one sweep. The original New Deal offers the best model for a Green New Deal because it faced similar challenges of conservation, immiseration, economic collapse and political reaction in the 1930s – and because it was so successful in overcoming them. Indeed, like the New Deal, the United States today needs nothing less than a program of national reconstruction that is more than the sum of carbon reduction, infrastructure, more jobs and better wages.

The United States is in dire need of redirection in this moment of deep social, economic and political crisis. I believe that the New Deal still provides a useful model for today, because it successfully grappled with one of the greatest threats to the nation in the form of the Great Depression of the 1930s. We as a nation are facing similar challenges that require an equally ambitious and thorough-going attack led by the federal government, which is the only entity with the power, money and democratic control to take charge.

I begin by briefly reiterating the dire situation facing the nation – economic, social, environmental and political – that forms the background to calls for a Green New Deal. I then enumerate the principles of the New Deal, which offer profound lessons for the country and ought to guide the formulation of a thorough-going redirection of public policy after forty years of neoliberal hegemony. Lastly, I lay out a set of policy guidelines for the major areas of concern and how they might be attacked in the spirit of the New Deal and its guiding principles.

The Dire State of the Nation

The many crises now embroiling this country should be clear to reasonable people of good conscience. First is an economic crisis. A new Great Depression may well be upon us, thanks to the Covid-19 epidemic. The plunge in GDP and job losses in early 2020 is sharper than the Great Depression and recovery will not come soon nor will jobs return as before. The Trump administration is utterly unprepared to respond, much as was the Hoover administration, which creates an opportunity for a real change in priorities.¹

Moreover, the economic failure goes beyond the immediate shock brought on by the coronavirus. Capitalism has not performed well under neoliberalism for the last fifty years as the record of repeated deep recessions, low productivity growth and stagnant wages shows.² So is the slow climb back from Great Recession, the worst recovery on record. Even after ten years, full employment has not been achieved and wages have barely budged.³

The chief cause of poor performance is weak capital investment due to a lack of technological opportunities for productive enterprise beyond informational technology. Just as important is the lack of mass buying power as a result of low growth of household incomes. The use of debt to boost spending in 2000s (particularly on houses) led to the 2008 bust and subsequent falls in homeownership and living space. Moreover, the level of uneven development increased, with dramatic schism between the biggest cities and imploding economies in lesser cities and towns.⁴

The second crisis is one of growing inequality, as wealth has been piling up atop the economic pyramid. Corporate net profits have been just fine, despite poor performance, because of repeated tax cuts and they have piled up surpluses in bank accounts or reinvested in their own stocks and mergers. The growing armies of the wealthy speculate in paper assets and real estate, or stash their excess in overseas tax havens, like the corporations.⁵

¹ Giles, Chris, "OECD warns of deepest economic scars in peacetime for a century," *Financial Times*, June 10, 2020.

² Brenner, Robert, *The Economics of Global Turbulence: The Advanced Capitalist Economies from Long Boom to Long Downturn, 1945-2005* (London/New York: Verso Press, 2006).

³ Kotz, David, US recovery? *New Left Review* #113, 2018: pp. 29-58.

⁴ Walker, Richard, *Pictures of a Gone City: Tech and the Dark Side of Prosperity in the San Francisco Bay Area* (Oakland CA: PM Press, 2018), chapter 2.

⁵ Brenner, Bob, "Escalating plunder," *New Left Review* #123, May-June 2020. \$32 trillion in overseas accounts, according to *Bloomberg Reports*.

The present wealth gap is the worst since the 1920s and truly represents a new Gilded Age.⁶ Wages for ordinary workers have been virtually stagnant for fifty years. The state of the bottom half of the working class is dire, thanks to repeated layoffs, growth of low-wage work and a long decline of unionization. Business strategies to undercut unions and wages have been bolstered by globalization and corporate reorganization – a deadly combination of the China price, Walmartization and Amazon.⁷

Add to this the pervasive racial and gender injustice of who owns capital assets and who is consigned to the lowest rungs of the underpaid labor force. What is most striking today in the city-regions that power the American economy is the conjunction of race, gender and class, in place of the traditional American opposition of these fundamental social axes.⁸

The third crisis is global warming, which is bearing down on the whole world like a runaway train. Climate change is not far in the future; it is here now and it is clobbering the earth and humanity. We are facing rapidly rising temperatures which produce greater storms and floods, longer droughts and bigger wildfires, failing crops and disappearing wildlife, rising sea levels and more.⁹

I hardly need say this to geographers, who have been in the forefront of studying and predicting climate change, dealing with natural disasters and failures of human response to them, and the political ecology of famine and migration among the wretched of the earth stuck by slow or fast-moving natural events. Even economists – always the last to know about the real world – are waking up to what we have been saying for decades, as seen in a recent report by the San Francisco Federal Reserve Bank on the economic impact of greater disasters, failing insurance, collapsing property values, government bankruptcy and more.¹⁰

Unfortunately, those three crises are only half the story. Three other grievous conditions of the body politic need to be addressed in the near future if we are to have the basis to address the economy, inequality and climate; these are crumbling infrastructure, social disintegration, and decaying democracy.

The decay of the nation's infrastructure is a relatively hidden aspect of the nation's failure of government and investment. The United States has neglected its physical infrastructure for decades. The result is a \$5 trillion backlog of delayed work on the country's highways and bridges, water and sewer systems, ports and airports, and more – earning a D+ from the American Society of Civil Engineers. This is why our communities are plagued with foul drinking water, collapsing dams and electric blackouts.¹¹

⁶ Kotz 2018. The San Francisco Bay Area, tech capital of the world, is the leader in enrichment at top. Walker 2018, chapter 3.

⁷ Greenhouse, Steven, *Beaten Down, Worked Up: The Past, Present and Future of American Labor* (New York: Penguin/Random House, 2019).

⁸ Walker 2018, chapter 4.

⁹ Klein, Naomi, *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. the Climate*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2014); Emmanuel, Kerry, *What We Know about Climate Change* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2d edition, 2018); Wallace-Wells, David, *The Uninhabitable Earth: Life After Warming* (New York: Tim Duggan Books, 2019).

¹⁰ <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/17/climate/federal-reserve-climate-financial-risk.html>

¹¹ LePatner, Barry, *Too Big to Fail: America's Failing Infrastructure and the Way Forward* (University of New England Press, 2010); Fisher, Thomas, "Fracture Critical", *Places Journal*, October 2009. ASCE Report Card for 2017, <https://www.infrastructurereportcard.org/americas-grades/>.

American's social infrastructure is also in dire straits. Could this be any more evident, in the midst of the Covid-19 crisis, than in the field of public health? The country was utterly unprepared for the epidemic, from the closure of unprofitable hospitals to the lack of personal protective gear for health workers. Similarly, the state of public education – one of the bedrocks of opportunity for the mass of the people – is pathetic after years of neoliberal budget cuts. And to this add the housing crisis that has been front and center over the last decade, due in part to an utter lack of investment in affordable housing.¹²

Another, more subtle side of the crisis of inequality and economic injustice is the deep damage they do the people who live them every day. Inequality is literally a sickness in the body politic, as public health researchers have shown. Physically, it strikes the bodies of the oppressed, abused and desperate people at the bottom of the social pyramid, who are most likely to get sick and die or to be jailed and struck down by police. Mentally, they are more likely to fall prey to doubt and despair, turning to addiction to numb the pain or coming apart emotionally.¹³

Meanwhile, the upper classes lose any sense of what ordinary people are experiencing or the good sense to care about it. They erect mental fences to justify their worth and become morally blind to the human wreckage they step over in the streets. Instead, they send out the police to do the dirty work of keeping the oppressed in their place -- especially blacks and other people of color.¹⁴

Lastly, the US is in the throes of a political crisis marked by mass rage against the establishment – which the liberals uncomprehendingly call 'Populism' – after decades of neglect of the working people by both Democrats and Republicans. On one side, the Far Right has surged, fed by white supremacy and religious obscurantism. On the other side, rebellion is brewing among the new working class of people of color, women and the young, who are fed up their dimming prospects, police violence and government inaction.¹⁵

At the same time as they turned their backs on the people, the neoliberals were busy paving the way for the parasitic growth of finance and the power of Wall Street, and they did nothing to curb it after the meltdown of 2008. In the same way, they greased the skids for the rise of the new tech media companies that now monopolize information and news but are unchecked in their abuse of social responsibility in the pursuit of profits.¹⁶

But capitulation to the power of capital is not the end of the corruption of American politics. We have seen the ruthless drive for unchecked power by the Republican Party and its henchmen,

¹² Cohn, Jonathan, *Sick: The Untold Story of America's Health Care Crisis* (New York: Harper Collins, 2007); Chesler, Beth, "Stop Defunding Our Public Schools," *The Nation*, April 18, 2019. <https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/oregon-education-defunding-public-schools/>; on the housing crisis, see Walker 2018, chapter 6.

¹³ Wilkinson, Richard and Kate Pickett, *The Spirit Level: Why Greater Equality Makes Societies Stronger* (London: Bloomsbury, 2009); Hojjat, Taherah and Rata Hojjat, *The Economics of Obesity: Poverty, Income Inequality and Health* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 2017).

¹⁴ Wise, Tim, *Under the Affluence: Shaming the Poor, Praising the Rich, and Sacrificing the Future of America* (San Francisco: City Light Books, 2017); Williams, Kristian, *Our Enemies in Blue: Police and Power in America* (Oakland CA: AK Press, 3d Edition, 2017); Platt, Tony, *Beyond These Walls: Rethinking Crime and Punishment in America* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2019).

¹⁵ Frank, Thomas, *Listen, Liberal: Or, What Ever Happened to the Party of the People?* (New York: Metropolitan Books/Henry Holt, 2016).

¹⁶ Walker 2018, chapter 9; Brenner 2020.

using every possible strategy from unlimited political donations to voter suppression.¹⁷ And, on top of this, the turn to demagoguery when all else fails, using the old fascist playbook of nationalism, xenophobia and victimization by hidden enemies, along with the Big Lie spread through social media. This is where we stand in the dark times of Trump.

The only way to meet these challenges, which are related and need to be addressed as a whole, is a sweeping program of political change and aggressive public policy. That is what the Green New Deal has come to summarize, along with Medicare for All. What a half-century of experience with neoliberalism has taught is that there is no alternative to strong government action led by mass popular mobilization. Leaving it to the Hidden Hand of the Market has not worked and was never intended to – marketization being the handmaiden of class struggle from above.¹⁸

Or as Naomi Klein puts it:

"...market capitalism cannot get us out of this mess and the only way to avert a climate breakdown is to undertake a radical reset of our entire economy. [which means] rejuvenation of genuine democracy that wrests power from the petrochemical and extractive industries; forces a more equitable distribution of resources; subsidizes massive new investments in energy, transit and housing infrastructure; and protects those whose lives are upended by the rapid economic transition."¹⁹

The New Deal still offers guidelines for how to attack the major crises of today. We as a nation are facing a set of profound challenges comparable to the era of the Great Depression which requires an equally ambitious and thorough-going attack led by the federal government – the only entity with the power, money and scale to take charge. The lessons of the New Deal enumerated here offer hope for an embattled nation and a guide to the redirecting public policy after 40 years of neoliberal deconstruction.

Much of this will already be known to geographers, as social scientists with mostly liberal views. Certainly, the outlines of the profound national and global crisis are well-known to most, if not all, of us. Nevertheless, I have found in my time trying to educate the public about the amazing turning point in US history known as the New Deal that very few people know more than highlights of the era, and even those bits of history are frequently muddled. So, while some of the lessons drawn will seem familiar, if not obvious, others will be decidedly less so.

It is encouraging to see the New Deal repeatedly invoked as a guide for a nation trying to find its way out of the present crisis – in presidential campaigns, leading newspapers and in social media.²⁰ Unfortunately, the left has too often criticized the New Deal for what it did not do –

¹⁷ Hacker, Jacob and Paul Pierson, *Off Center: The Republican Revolution and the Erosion of American Democracy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005); Roth, Zachary, *The Great Suppression: Voting Rights, Corporate Cash, and the Conservative Assault on Democracy* (New York: Crown Books, 2016).

¹⁸ Harvey, David, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

¹⁹ Klein, Naomi, *On Fire: The (Burning) Case for a Green New Deal* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2019), p xx.

²⁰ Baker, Kevin, "We can do it again: politics, power and the Green New Deal," *Harper's Magazine*, May 2019. Canellos, Peter, "What FDR understood about socialism that today's Democrats don't," *Politico*, August 16, 2019. Leonhardt, David, "FDR got it, most Democrats don't," *New York Times*, January 12, 2020. Elving, Ron, "In the 1930s, work programs spelled HOPE for millions of jobless Americans," *NPR*, April 4, 2020. Goldberg, Michelle, "The new Great Depression is coming. Will there be a New New Deal?" *New York Times*, May 2, 2020. Sisson, George, "Stimulus isn't enough. Our cities need a post-pandemic New Deal," *Curbed*, April 16, 2020.

bring the socialist revolution, end White Supremacy, liberate women, and so forth – and would do better to appreciate what it did, in fact, accomplish in a single decade, 1933-1942 – roughly the time left to deal with climate change. By comparison with the long sweep of US history dominated by slavery, capitalism, business power and market ideology, the New Deal was remarkably radical in the way it thoroughly refashioned the country and its politics. It is to that legacy we should turn for inspiration in the present dire circumstances.

How the New Deal Responded to the Crisis of the 1930s

The New Deal is a shorthand for the policies and achievements of the administration of President Franklin D. Roosevelt from 1933 to 1942, when the country entered World War II. It encompassed far more than the best-known programs, such as Social Security and the Works Progress Administration, involving scores of laws, executive order and administrative programs. The Living New Deal is documenting that amazing decade, reviving historical memory and rethinking deeply ingrained political tropes – because so much of the conventional wisdom about the New Deal is wrong.²¹

I will consider the New Deal's accomplishments in six areas: economic recovery and regulation, employment and class, investment and modernization, conservation and restoration, programs for the people, and national political revival.

Economic Stabilization and Recovery

The Great Depression was the greatest failure of capitalism in US history and one that challenged the legitimacy of the nation's class system, dominant ideology and political leadership. By early 1933, US output had fallen by one-third, unemployment risen to one-quarter of the laborforce, and profits and wages had declined sharply. The newborn New Deal immediately attacked the depression on three fronts.

The first was to end financial excess and put the banking system on a new foundation. This meant shutting down bad banks, separating commercial and investment banking, and providing deposit insurance for small savings. In addition, FDR called in gold, devalued and solidified the dollar, and regulated stock and bond markets. Critically, the New Deal did not just help the big institutions, it had the Home Owners' Loan Corporation (HOLC) buy up over a million distressed mortgages to salvage homeowners.²²

A second front was an attempt to stabilize industry and agriculture. Price and output controls were tried under the National Industrial Recovery Act, a conservative plan to limit competition that was a failure and abandoned even before the Supreme Court declared it unconstitutional. On the other hand, price and output controls under the Agricultural Adjustment Act (AAA) were a success – chiefly because it paid farmers to take land out of production – and became the basis of US farm policy for the next fifty years.²³

²¹ See <https://livingnewdeal.org/what-was-the-new-deal/>

²² Romer, Christina, "What ended the Great Depression?" *Journal of Economic History*, 1992, vol 52, no. 4: 757-84.

²³ The AAA was also rejected by the Supreme Court, but a revised version was passed again in 1938. It favored large growers, however, and served to gradually squeeze out tenants and smaller farmers. Conkin, Paul, *A Revolution Down on the Farm: The Transformation of American Agriculture Since 1929* (Lexington KY: University of Kentucky Press, 2008)

Part of the NIRA survived, however, and that was the Public Works Administration (PWA) under Harold Ickes which became one of the pillars of the New Deal, unleashing in billions in federal investment on infrastructure.²⁴

The third branch of the administration's recovery strategy was a massive relief effort that began with the Federal Emergency Relief Act (FERA) under Harry Hopkins. FERA salvaged bankrupt state and local treasuries to keep relief payments flowing to the unemployed and end the downward spiral of shrinking government revenues, spending and employment. FERA created the Civil Works Administration (CWA) in the winter of 1933-34, which was so successful in providing relief work that Congress created a permanent replacement in 1935, the Works Progress Administration (WPA), also directed by Hopkins.

The New Deal cost roughly \$650B in today's dollars over a decade, or \$65B per year. That amounted to 5.4% of GDP, which averaged \$1.21T per year over that decade (in 2012 dollars). The equivalent percentage of today's pre-crisis \$19T GDP comes to \$1.26T.²⁵ That is a surprisingly modest sum compared to the \$5T spent in the first half of 2020 to combat the economic plunge from the Covid-19 epidemic.

New Deal federal spending was paid for by higher taxes on the rich and corporations, aided by revived alcohol taxes from the end of Prohibition. The argument has been made that FDR's 'soak the rich' Revenue Act of 1935 was mostly for show, but this is misleading. Prior to that, federal revenues came chiefly from excise taxes and afterward income and corporate taxes grew faster to pass half the total by 1937. Moreover, the Revenue Act laid the basis for the generalization of income taxes during and after the war.²⁶

Similarly, much has been made of Roosevelt's fiscal conservatism, but he was pushed by advisors like Marriner Eccles and Laughlin Curry to tolerate federal deficits for the first time outside of war emergencies – especially after the slump of 1937.²⁷ As the Second World War proved, the federal government can tolerate large deficits and the New Deal should have been even bolder.

Nevertheless, the economy recovered smartly under the New Deal – which did not 'fail' to solve the Great Depression, as often claimed.²⁸ GDP grew at an average rate of around 9% and reached the peak of 1929 by 1939 and the pre-depression trajectory by 1941 – before the US entered the war.²⁹ Contrary to popular opinion, the war did not solve the Great Depression, but it did absorb the last of the unemployed by recruiting millions into the military.

Employment and the Working Class

²⁴ Smith, Jason Scott, *Building New Deal Liberalism: The Political Economy of Public Works, 1933-1956*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

²⁵ Fishback, Price and Kachanovskaya, Valentina, "The Multiplier for Federal Spending in the States during the Great Depression," *Journal of Economic History*, v. 75, No. 1, 2015, pp. 125-62. Adjusted GDP from <https://www.multpl.com/us-gdp-inflation-adjusted/table/by-year>.

²⁶ Leff, Mark, *The Limits of Symbolic Reform: The New Deal and Taxation, 1933-1939* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1984). Report of the Secretary of the Treasury for 1937, p. 2 (Washington DC: US Government Printing Office, 1937).

²⁷ Nelson, Mark, *Jumping the Abyss: Marriner S. Eccles and the New Deal, 1933-1940* (Salt Lake City UT: University of Utah Press, 2017).

²⁸ By most every writer, past and present, of all political stripes, creating one of the most pernicious myths about the New Deal.

²⁹ Romer 1992.

The second pillar of New Deal policy was aiding the working people, starting with mass work relief programs. The New Dealers may have saved capitalism, but in the process, they saved millions of people from desolation. Besides the CWA and WPA, Roosevelt created the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) and FERA paid for the states to run their own work relief projects.³⁰

Work relief programs created more than 20 million jobs over the decade, peaking at around 4 million in winter 1933-34 and summer 1938. These were usually six-month or one-year posts, with reenlistment, but they were life-saving for working class households and soul-saving for the unemployed. On average, relief work reduced unemployment by roughly 5%. In addition, PWA indirect employment accounted for an equal number of jobs, or another 5% reduction.³¹

Employed workers did better under the New Deal, which legalized unionization, first under the NIRA and then the National Labor Relations Act (NLRA) of 1935. Rising union density brought better wages, especially for the newly organized industrial unions. New Deal public works programs demanded that contractors provide fair and prevailing wages, later generalized under the Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938. In turn, greater labor organizing and unions put pressure on the administration to pass legislation and enforce the new rules.³²

Furthermore, the New Deal created the first federal safety net through the unemployment insurance program of the NLRA and the pension and welfare provisions of the Social Security Act of 1935.

Higher wages aided economic recovery and long-term growth, as did relief and transfer payments to households and federal aid to state and local governments – all of which stimulated aggregate consumption. Perhaps most important, the combination of greater taxation of the rich and higher incomes for the working class resulted in sharply reduced inequality, ushering in the most egalitarian period in US history in the postwar era.

Investment and Modernization

The New Deal was more than a short-term program of recovery and make-work projects. The federal government invested in the infrastructure of the country, or what was then called "public works". The government-built tens of thousands of civic facilities, such as city halls, schools, courthouses, sewers and parks, as well as regional systems like dams, aqueducts and airports.³³

At the heart of this effort was the Public Works Administration (PWA). Just as important, the administration pumped money into existing federal agencies, like the Bureau of Public Roads and Bureau of Reclamation, and demanded contributions from the states. Governments at every level – federal, state and local – were reanimated. Moreover, the feds asked the state and cities to propose projects they wanted locally and thus gained important political buy-in.³⁴

³¹ Darby, Michael, "Three-and-a-Half Million U.S. Employees Have Been Misaid: Or, an Explanation of Unemployment, 1934-1941," *Journal of Political Economy*, 1976, v. 84, no 1, pp. 1-16. Smith 2007, p. 97. Unemployment averaged 8.8 million out of a labor force of 53 million, 1933-42, or more than 17%, not counting government relief work.

³² Levine, Rhonda, *Class Struggle and the New Deal: Industrial Labor, Industrial Capital, and the State* (Lawrence KS: University Press of Kansas, 1988).

³³ Leighninger, Robert, *Long Run Public Investment: The Forgotten Legacy of the New Deal*, (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2007).

³⁴ Williams, J. Kerwin, *Grants-in-Aid Under the Public Works Administration: A Study in Federal-State-Local Relations* (New York: AMS Press, 1988).

Crucially, the New Deal walked on two legs: big regional infrastructure and small local projects. For the latter, the relief agencies were absolutely vital. The CWA, WPA, CCC, and FERA undertook local improvements numbering in the hundreds of thousands: playgrounds, recreation halls, baseball fields, picnic areas, water lines, street trees, ranger stations, park roads and trails, and many more. These, too, were projects asked for by local governments, with local financial participation.³⁵

Almost entirely overlooked is the degree to which the New Deal modernized the United States through its massive investments in hydropower, rural electrification, airports and highways. It aided the technological transition to electric motors and machinery, cars and trucks, airplanes and household appliances, bringing the entire country into the 20th century.³⁶ The 1930s witnessed the second greatest leap in economic productivity in US history after the 1920s – higher than the World War by far. Government investment continued to pay off long after the New Deal ended. The war effort was the first beneficiary, recognized at the time, and New Deal roads, dams, schools and hospitals continued to function for decades after that. In fact, most are still with us.³⁷

Conservation and Restoration

An essential element of the New Deal was conservation – healing the land and resources along with the people. The New Deal was nothing if not green. This massive effort is too easily overlooked because so much of it took place far away from the great urban centers, on rivers, rangelands, forests, farmlands, marshes and coasts. It, too, was a combination of large and small-scale projects.³⁸

Giant hydroelectric, flood control and irrigation works were built by the PWA, TVA, Army Corps of Engineers and Bureau of Reclamation. Meanwhile, CCC enrollees planted 3 billion trees under the direction of the US Forest Service and the WPA planted street trees in towns across the nation. A massive soil conservation program was set in motion on damaged range and farm lands under the Soil Conservation Service, which built check dams, regraded hillsides, and planted windbreaks with the help of CCC labor. Grazing controls were imposed for the first time on federal lands under the new Grazing Service.³⁹

Around 200 new national wildlife refuges were established during the Roosevelt years, often at the president's personal direction. Several new national parks and national monuments were established and national forests were expanded. The CCC and WPA built the waterworks,

³⁵ Taylor, Nick, *American-Made: The Enduring Legacy of the WPA* (New York: Bantam Books, 2009).

³⁶ Tobey, Ronald, *Technology as Freedom: The New Deal and the Electrical Modernization of the American Home* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).

³⁷ Field, Alexander, *A Great Leap Forward: 1930s Depression and US Economic Growth*, (New Haven CT: Yale University Press, 2011). Smith 2006; Leighninger 2007.

³⁸ Brinkley, Douglas, *Rightful Heritage: Franklin D. Roosevelt and the Land of America*, (New York: Harper Books, 2016). Alexander, Benjamin, *The New Deal's Forest Army: How the Civilian Conservation Corps Worked*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2018). Phillips, Sarah, *This Land, This Nation: Conservation, Rural America, and the New Deal* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

³⁹ On the CCC's work, see Lacy, Leslie, *The Soil Soldiers: The Civilian Conservation Corps in the Great Depression* (Radnor PA: Chilton Book Company, 1976); Merrill, Perry, *Roosevelt's Forest Army* (Montpellier VT: self-published, 1981); Maher, Neil, *Nature's New Deal* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008). On the SCS, see Simms, D. Harper, *The Soil Conservation Service* (New York: Praeger, 1970).

roads and campgrounds that rendered federal recreational lands usable. A new Duck Stamp program channeled millions of dollars from hunters to wildlife programs.⁴⁰

At the same time, agricultural policy paid for the withdrawal of millions of acres of farmland from production, which returned to wetlands and woodlands that aided wildlife. Much of the expansion of federal protected areas came from the purchase of degraded farmland in the Dust Bowl and bankrupt eastern farms that reforested over time.

Programs for the People

An essential principle of the New Deal was universal programs with non-discrimination clauses. This was a matter of principle, but it had the added benefit of making federal actions more popular with the public. The public works and relief programs contained non-discrimination clauses which, while often circumvented by local officials, still assured millions of jobs for African Americans and other minorities. Social Security included all employers and all employees regardless of income or race.⁴¹

Perhaps the best evidence of universality was the geographical distribution of New Deal programs, from relief to education to public health. Every county in the country received federal funds for a high school, hospital or other civic building and benefitted from land restoration, recreational facilities or farm aid. The New Deal made a point of investing in depressed regions, where local people witnessed the impact of federal policies with their own eyes, both in what was built and who did the work.⁴²

At the same time, the New Deal created targeted programs for the disabled, discriminated and downtrodden. It launched first federal initiatives to meet the special needs of the handicapped. It brought a turnaround in the treatment of Native American tribes. Marginal farmers were singled out for aid as in the Farm Tenant Act and the work of the Resettlement Administration. There were programs specifically aimed at African American communities, from school lunches to public housing in both rural and urban areas.⁴³

Lastly, there was a firm belief in the need to address the whole person and the needs of the public as a whole. The New Deal prioritized aid to education, from lunches and teacher's aides to college buildings and laboratories; built up health programs from school nurses to the

⁴⁰ Of course, there has been serious criticisms of big dams, irrigating deserts and other conservation ideas popular in the middle of the 20th century; just as with race, the New Deal has an uneven record that has to be considered in relation to the science and society of the age.

⁴¹ The Social Security Act excluded farm workers and domestics, which was standard practice in national pension programs at the time. It as, moreover, demanded by American farmers. There is little evidence that it meant as racial discrimination, though it definitely had that effect. In any case, the omission was rectified in 1950. DeWitt, Larry, The Decision to Exclude Agricultural and Domestic Workers from the 1935 Social Security Act, *Social Security Bulletin*, 2010, vol 70 #4 pp: 49-68.

⁴² Smith 2006, Leighninger 2007. Phillips, Sarah, *This Land, This Nation: Conservation, Rural America, and the New Deal* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007). Schulman, Bruce, *From Cotton Belt to Sunbelt: Federal Policy, Economic Development, and the Transformation of the South, 1938-1980* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1994). Taylor, Jason, Did New Deal and World War II public capital investments facilitate a 'Big Push' in the American South? *Journal of Institutional and Theoretical Economics*, 2009, 165/2: pp. 307-341.

⁴³ While the New Deal fell short on racial equality in many ways, it still comes off relatively well in light of the prevailing racial order of its time. Crucially, its relief and jobs programs were of great benefit to racial minorities and it won over the black vote to the Democratic Party. Sitkoff, Harvard, *A New Deal for Blacks: The Emergence of Civil Rights as a National Issue: The Depression Decade*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009). Weiss, Nancy. 1983. *Farewell to the Party of Lincoln: Black Politics in the Age of FDR*. Princeton University Press.

National Institutes of Health; and invested in recreational facilities and programs, from playgrounds to national parks. One of the most remarkable dimensions of the New Deal was its creation, *en masse*, of civil facilities and public art to edify and elevate the spirits of the people.⁴⁴

Political Renewal of the Nation

Franklin Roosevelt was a master politician and deal-maker who played his cards carefully, but he was also a true leader, coalition builder, progressive reformer, and believer in American democracy. These qualities ran deep among all the New Dealers, like Harry Hopkins, Frances Perkins, and Mary McLeod Bethune.⁴⁵

Their first step was to take charge of a terrible situation with a real sense of urgency. They waded into the fray, ignoring precedent, deficits and naysayers, to introduce legislation, issue executive orders and draw up plans for action. There was no blueprint, just a liberal pragmatism and willingness to try anything that might work. For all his patrician background, FDR was able to speak to the public in a manner that restored their confidence in government and gave them hope.⁴⁶

The New Dealers built a broad class, regional and racial coalition. FDR knew that his legislative program depended on southern congressmen and he was careful not to alienate the south over race, because he understood that left-leaning white populists in the southern delegation supported New Deal programs. That coalition frayed over the years as southern landowners reasserted their power.⁴⁷

FDR was willing to bring unions on board and address the catastrophic conditions facing the working class. Conversely, his aristocratic origins gave him the confidence to stand up to the rich and the corporations when needed. He wisely sought to defang radical uprisings by meeting some of their demands, as in the case of the Townsend Movement.⁴⁸

A vital quality of New Deal leaders was their ethical commitment to the public good and to the welfare of the common people. They recognized the importance of work to people's self-worth; the value of civic works in uplifting communities; and that education, recreation and the arts were essential to the human spirit. Their sense of public service also meant the absence of scandal hanging over any of the agencies dispensing huge amounts of money, far and wide.⁴⁹

Lastly, Roosevelt and the New Dealers understood that a nation devastated by the Great Depression and left rudderless by Republican leadership needed a new sense of national purpose. The New Deal gave Americans a project of national renewal in which they could participate, feel ownership in, and witness in their everyday lives.

⁴⁴ Musher, Sharon Ann, *Democratic Art: The New Deal's Influence on American Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015).

⁴⁵ Smith, Jason Scott, *A Concise History of the New Deal*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014). On the New Deal's progressive roots, see Lawson, Alan, *A Commonwealth of Hope: The New Deal Response to Crisis* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006).

⁴⁶ Leuchtenberg, William, *Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal, 1932-40*, (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1963).

⁴⁷ Katznelson, Ira, *Fear Itself: The New Deal and the Origins of Our Time*, (New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2013).

⁴⁸ Amenta, Edwin, *When Movements Matter: The Townsend Plan and the Rise of Social Security* (Princeton University Press, 2006).

⁴⁹ Scott 2006, Leighninger 2007.

FDR was urged by many liberals to seize emergency powers but he refused. He was confronted by fascist movements, was abandoned by the capitalist class, many of whom were fascist sympathizers and feared FDR's alliance with the working class. Nevertheless, Roosevelt was a committed democrat who wanted, like Lincoln, to save the Republic from itself.⁵⁰

The New Deal was a political earthquake in American governance. The power of the federal government grew exponentially and the federal system was transformed. The Democrats replaced Lincoln's Republicans as the dominant party for the next half-century. And, despite many failings of the New Deal on racial grounds, there was an epochal shift of African American voters to the Democrats.⁵¹

How a Green New Deal Should Meet the Crises of Today

Historians like to quote the adage, "Those who forget the past are doomed to repeat it."⁵² But I prefer the reverse: those who forget the New Deal are doomed *not* to repeat it. This country desperately needs a program of economic, social and political renewal that goes beyond crisis management and the New Deal provides the best model for what needs to be done – quickly, forcefully and confidently.

Of course, the country is changed from the one that the Roosevelt Administration inherited and its problems are different, bigger and thornier than ever. Coming up with good public policies is still a gamble in which the people have to demand answers, the experts need to offer convincing solutions, and immense political opposition has to be overcome as a dedicated administration attacks the problems before it. Nevertheless, as we face the unknown and search for answers, the lessons of the New Deal can still provide guidance.

Economic Stabilization and Recovery

The economic emergency created by the Covid-19 pandemic is readily apparent and stimulus money has flowed in large quantities. But there has been little serious talk about what to do in the longer run. As the crisis deepens, the public will demand greater federal action and neoliberal shibboleths will peel away in the face of an implacable reality. The hope is that the need for a Green New Deal will soon become evident to all.

Electing a Democrat as president will not be enough, however. The Obama Administration's response to the Great Recession fell far short of the mark, even though the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) injected some \$850 billion. It was only the Federal Reserve Bank's crash program of low interest rates, quantitative easing and purchases of troubled assets that pulled the economy back from the brink. We have to do better this time.

Stimulus and Beyond

⁵⁰ Katznelson 2013.

⁵¹ Wallis, John and Wallace Oates "The Impact of the New Deal on American Federalism." IN: Michael Bordo, Claudia Goldin and Eugene White, Eds, *The Defining Moment: The Great Depression and the American Economy in the Twentieth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), pp. 155-80.

⁵² Usually attributed to George Santayana as, "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it".

So far, relief has dominated the response, with over \$500 billion in federal payouts to shuttered businesses and unemployed workers. While this money is often called "stimulus", a comatose economy cannot be stimulated; this is a gigantic relief and rescue operation. What is more it repeats the errors of the last bailout by letting the Trump Treasury hand out the money to large corporations without oversight and putting the Fed in charge of providing effectively \$5 trillion in loans and bonds purchases to big business.⁵³

The Democratic leadership in Congress failed the working people and assured that their corporate sponsors would walk away with billions for their shareholders and executives. The contrast could not be more striking with Europe, where aid to business was made contingent on companies keeping workers on their payrolls. Even Britain's Tory government did that.

Given the continuing Covid19 epidemic and stuttering US economy, the federal bailout of capital will not suffice for economic recovery, let alone rescue the millions of workers and their families who have lost their jobs, can't pay the rent and are going hungry. What is needed is a major federal push to create employment, invest in working people, rebuild national infrastructure, and heal the earth – leading and pushing the economy through a difficult transition to a new path of growth, one that is green, just and participatory – as I will detail in the rest of this paper.⁵⁴

Restoring Government Finances

The current financial situation of state and local governments is desperate. State deficits are a major part of counter-cyclical policy, but that only works if the federal government backs them up in times of crisis with additional transfers. People forget that state and local governments spend almost as much as the federal government, making them major employers and sources of contracts to business. Supporting state and local budgets is one of the simplest ways to revive employment in a period of recovery. The New Deal bailed out the states and the same is necessary today.⁵⁵

The federal government has undertaken a massive rescue operation by pumping almost \$5 trillion into the maw of a sinking economy in 2020. Yet once again, as in the Great Recession, fiscal policy has fallen short and the Federal Reserve has had to step in to fill the gap with low interest rates, aid for bank loans, and massive purchases of federal, state and municipal bonds. The lack of action by the rest of the government is so palpable that the Chairman of the Fed has called for a stronger fiscal policy.⁵⁶

The simple fact is, as Keynes theorized and the New Deal (and World War II) proved, the federal government can print and borrow money at will without violating the law, losing public trust and going broke. A Green New Deal can readily be paid for by running federal deficits no bigger than the ones created by the Bush and Trump tax cuts.⁵⁷

Taxing the Rich

⁵³ Brenner 2020.

⁵⁴ Wolf, Martin, "The world economy is now collapsing," *Financial Times*, April 14, 2020.

⁵⁵ Myers, John, "Coronavirus plunges California into worst budget deficit in state history," *Los Angeles Times*, May 7, 2020.

⁵⁶ <https://www.cnn.com/2020/04/27/the-fed-says-it-is-expanding-its-municipal-bond-buying-program.html>. Politi, James and Colby Smith, "Grim Jay Powell sets Federal Reserve up for the long haul", *Financial Times*, April 29, 2020. <https://www.ft.com/content/1198c03d-75c6-454c-8a8c-f9ae27bc2e44>

⁵⁷ Pettifor, Ann, *The Case for a Green New Deal* (London: Verso, 2019)

In order to pay for enhanced government spending, investment and employment, it is necessary to tax the rich harder after decades of tax cutting. Taxes on the rich and corporations are about half what they were in the 1950s, systematically reduced by huge tax cuts in the 1960s, 1980s, 1990s, 2000s and 2010s. Meanwhile, the burden has been shifted to the working and middle classes by the dramatic rise in local and state sales taxes and use fees.⁵⁸

To reduce the outrageous fortunes at the top, a Green New Deal must raise taxes that impact the wealthy and big business: corporate taxes, inheritance taxes, capital gains taxes, property (real estate) taxes and the top realms of income taxes. A Green New Deal, at a cost of a trillion dollars per year, could be easily financed just by reversing the Republican tax giveaways of the last decade – let alone the last forty years.⁵⁹

Financial Cleansing

The financial system of the country is potentially quite shaky. After the crisis of 2007-09, banks were forced to increase reserves, which has served them well, but bond markets, stock markets and hedge funds were never brought to heel after the mortgage fiasco. Corporate debt ballooned in the 2010s, real estate investment trusts (REITs) carried massive debts to finance their plays in property markets, and off-the-books lending by banks has again led to questionable practices and shaky futures. But instead of reining in financiers, the 2020 bailout rescued them from a deflating bubble.⁶⁰

Debt is also weighing heavily on households, whose incomes have been interrupted, or even ended, by the Covid-19 economic rupture. Forgiving student debt is an entirely sensible idea, since so much of it is due to predatory private colleges and increases in tuition due to cutbacks in state support for public higher education. The inability of ordinary people to escape onerous debt is largely owing to the pernicious bankruptcy laws of the early 2000s, passed to protect big lenders, need to be overturned. We cannot repeat Obama's fatal error of allowing two million households to lose their homes in the Great Recession while bailing out the bankers.⁶¹

Taxing the rich and corporations harder is needed to reduce the parasitic effect of finance on the real economy (extraction of rents) and to calm financial speculation that arises from the use of excess income in the feverish pursuit of return from assets like stocks, bonds and real estate.⁶² Redistribution and debt relief are also good for growth because because stagnant working-class wages and household incomes suppress the mass consumer demand that fuels business sales.

Employment and the Working Class

⁵⁸ Overall, the net tax rate is flat at about 28% for most households, dipping to 24% for the very rich. The system is even more regressive if health care costs are included. Saez, Emmanuel and Gabriel Zucman, *The Triumph of Injustice: How the Rich Dodge Taxes and How to Make Them Pay*, (New York: WW Norton, 2019).

⁵⁹ A Senate Budget Committee minority report has shown that of the \$780B federal deficit in 2018, the Bush tax cuts were responsible for \$490B and the Trump tax cuts for \$165B. That's well over \$.6T dollars per year readily available for Green New Deal programs.

⁶⁰ Authers, John. "Beezelbub's telephone directory," *Bloomberg's Points of Return newsletter*, April 27, 2020; Tett, Gillian, "How we all became addicted to cheap debt," *Financial Times*, October 20, 2017; Brenner 2020.

⁶¹ Armstrong, Robert, "Coronavirus and personal debt: the Americans living on the knife edge," *Financial Times*, June 22, 2020; Kantor, Alice, "The \$1.6 trillion US student debt nightmare," *Financial Times*, December 26, 2019.

⁶² Shaxson, Nicolaus, *The Financial Curse: How Global Finance is Making Us All Poorer* (New York: Grove Atlantic, 2018).

The emphasis for public policy today has to be on the working people. The Covid-19 epidemic has clobbered working people, with over 40 million laid off in Spring 2020 out of a workforce of 165 million. And the long-term employment situation is grim, as well. Even when official jobless rate went below 4% before Covid-19 hit, the underemployment rate was still two to three times that and the laborforce participation rate a modest 63% because so many discouraged workers never came back from the Great Recession.⁶³

One good effect of the current crisis is that as the upper classes shelter in place and professionals work at home, the epidemic has stripped away the ideological veil to reveal how much depends on the labor of "essential workers" – overwhelmingly manual, blue-collar workers. They make up the third of the labor force in the lowest wage, most precarious and least regarded jobs, who are majority women and people of color.⁶⁴

There are three things that a Green New Deal must do for the working people: jobs programs, increased wages and support for labor organizing.

Creating Jobs

A Green New Deal will need to move quickly to salvage working people's lives and dignity, as the New Deal did, as unemployment will be severe and persistent. There is so much important work to be done that coming up with jobs is not difficult: the needs in health care, road repair, child care and more are obvious to all and can be met by new programs such as a Public Health Corps, Education Corps and the like.⁶⁵

Job programs need to ameliorate the short-comings of US labor markets. One is racial and gender bias; a Green New Deal needs strong anti-discrimination rules that are well enforced. Immigrants need to be included, not ignored or deported. Under-employment needs to be addressed, as millions are working less than full-time involuntarily or have dropped out entirely. Moreover, there must be jobs (not 'retraining') for workers displaced by the move to green energy and other industrial transitions.⁶⁶

The ultimate goal is good jobs for all. Government programs should aim to generate *better* work than the private sector, to draw workers out of crummy jobs and back into the labor force. Jobs should be, wherever possible, full-time, secure for designated periods, and without swing shifts and on-call work.

Raising Wages

A key lesson of the New Deal was that reducing inequality means squeezing from both ends of the income distribution: raising the bottom half and cutting down the top 1%. The key is raising the share of national income going to the working class, which has fallen for decades. That requires the assurance of good wages and benefits for those who work, support for labor organizing, and pensions for the retired and disabled. While the US is good at employing young

⁶³ Benanav, Aaron. "Automation and the future of work" *New Left Review*, 2019, #119, pp. xx-yy, #120, pp. 117-46.

⁶⁴ "US jobless claims pass 40 million," *New York Times*, May 28, 2020 at <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/28/business/unemployment-stock-market-coronavirus.html>. On essential workers, see <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/18/us/coronavirus-women-essential-workers.html>.

⁶⁵ O'Mara, Collin, "7.7 million young people are unemployed. We need a new 'Tree Army'", *New York Times*, May 18, 2020. <https://nyti.ms/2WDR6Nb>.

⁶⁶ Reich, Robert, "Almost 80% of US workers live paycheck to paycheck," *The Guardian*, July 29, 2018.

workers (compared to Europe), it leaves them with lousy jobs, lack of skills and lower prospects than their parents, made worse by underfunded education and a mountain of college debt.⁶⁷

The foundation for better wages is three-fold, as the New Deal showed. First, the federal government must create a wage floor, which starts with a higher federal minimum wage for employers across the country. Next, there needs to be a federal *living wage* – adjusted for the cost of living – required of all federal contractors, as well as government agencies themselves. This is effectively what the PWA and WPA required.

Third, men and woman and people of all colors must be paid the same wage for similar work. Rectifying racial and gender disparities in pay is essential to the pursuit of economic justice in America. Because two-thirds of the working class of America today is made up of women, immigrants, children of immigrants and African Americans, economic and social justice are converging. Thus, putting "working people" at the center of a Green New Deal means putting people of color on the same plane as whites.

Getting Organized

Unionization yields higher wages and gives workers countervailing power to demand better benefits, regular work and safer conditions. A Green New Deal must get rid of state 'right to work' laws and revive federal labor laws and enforcement. Furthermore, unions are crucial to worker education, training and mobilization, which have a profound impact on politics – including swaying the public to a Green New Deal. There has to a reciprocal development of transformation federal policy and a revived labor movement exerting union pressure and providing input from workers.⁶⁸

The geographic distribution of jobs matters, too. New jobs need to be created where people are, not in the most dynamic places that private employers favor. The cumulative advantages of the biggest cities are only increasing, leaving behind the wreckage of smaller cities and towns. Moreover, the young and unskilled need education and training to participate in modern labor markets.⁶⁹

Employment is also the means to restoring people's lives, as the New Dealers understood. Work is essential to providing people a sense of worth, supporting their families and making a contribution to their communities. A Universal Basic Income (UBI) might provide a floor for household incomes, but the working people want to work, above all else.⁷⁰

investment and Modernization

As a Green New Deal strives to reduce carbon emissions, it will have the additional task of renovating America's dilapidated infrastructure. This will require investment, planning and

⁶⁷ Desmond, Matthew, "Americans want to believe that jobs are the solution to poverty; they're not," *New York Times Magazine*, September 11, 2018.

⁶⁸ Anyone who thinks unions are a thing of the past, chiefly white, male and conservative, should listen to Berkeley organizer/researcher Jane McAlevey. Schirmer, Eleni, "Jane McAlevey's vision for the future of American labor," *The New Yorker*, June 16, 2020.

⁶⁹ Storper, Michael, "Separate worlds: Explaining the current wave of regional polarization," *Journal of Economic Geography*, 18 (2018) pp. 247–270; also Storper, *The Keys to the City* (Princeton University Press, 2013).

⁷⁰ Attewell, Stephen, *People Must Live by Work: Direct Job Creation in America from FDR to Reagan* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018)

research to redirect the economy down a greener and more modern path of growth. The Covid-19 crisis has provided a real opportunity to redirect the economy along greener lines, if enlightened policies are put in place soon.⁷¹

Renewing Rotting Infrastructure

Infrastructure is a term that makes ordinary people's eyes glaze over, yet it could not be more important to the daily lives and welfare of Americans. It is simply intolerable for people to lack running water, to die in wildfires triggered by faulty wires, or to lose their homes to failing dams and levees. Our children should not be drinking toxic water, put in crumbling school buildings and living in rat-infested neighborhoods. And this is to say nothing of the annoyances of bad bus service, packed subways and potholed streets.

A Green New Deal must create well-funded equivalents of the PWA and WPA, as well as ample budgets for line agencies like the Department of Transportation and Army Corps of Engineers. Moreover, as in the New Deal infrastructure policy has to walk on two legs: large-scale projects have to be complemented by small-scale public works – which Obama's ARRA program notably failed to do.

We also need an ideological shift in thinking about infrastructure. It is a public good, even when built and operated by private business, and government oversight is always called for. Indeed, government and cooperative ownership often function better than profit-seeking management, contrary to neoliberal mythology.⁷² Better planning may well require agencies along the lines of the TVA to oversee regional development. And, in an age saturated with the ideology of innovation and disruption, what needs to be emphasized is maintenance and repair, an idea regaining strength in recent years.⁷³

Reducing Carbon Emissions

The transition from fossil fuels to renewable energy requires major investment in large-scale solar and wind power generation. Meanwhile, WPA-type work teams can be fanning out across the country installing solar panels on millions of homes, apartments and commercial buildings. Energy upgrades can be joined to a program of home building.

Efficiency in energy use is equally important. Transportation can be improved by building more mass transit, replacing fleets of trucks, and coordinating housing construction with transit lines. To upgrade buildings, a Green New Deal should launch a sweeping program of insulation of older buildings by small-scale work teams of the WPA kind. It should, in addition, subsidize the purchase of new furnaces, air conditioners, double-pane windows and water heaters, with installation by green WPA workers.⁷⁴

⁷¹ "The epidemic provides the chance to do good by the climate," *The Economist*, March 26, 2020.

⁷² Mazzucato, Mariana, *The Entrepreneurial State: Debunking Public vs. Private Sector Myths* (London: Penguin, 2013).

⁷³ Steven J. Jackson, "Rethinking Repair," IN: Tarleton Gillespie, Pablo Boczkowski, and Kirsten Foot, Eds. *Media Technologies* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2014). Mattern, Shannon, "Maintenance and care: A working guide to the repair of rust, dust, cracks, and corrupted code in our cities, our homes, and our social relations," *Places Journal*, November 2018.

⁷⁴ The most comprehensive plan in the public area is that of Jay Inslee, *Evergreen Economy Plan: Good Jobs, Clean Energy, Modern Infrastructure* (Inslee for President Campaign). Also, Aronoff et al, 2019, pp 118-128.

Better electric grids are needed. More distributed supply, including small-scale wind and solar, requires micro-grids and better grid management. Hardened power lines, underground lines and electronic shutoffs are all needed to reduce the danger of wildfires.⁷⁵ New infrastructure must be less carbon-intensive than simply pouring concrete and laying asphalt.⁷⁶

Modernizing Technology

Major investments in infrastructure must come with technical upgrades, such as faster internet, advanced water treatment and high-speed trains. These dovetail with efforts at energy efficiency, as in the use of the internet for management of smart buildings, driverless vehicles and bus movements. Better government procurement and permits standards for vehicles, buildings and appliances are essential for driving technical innovation.⁷⁷

Technical change demands, in turn, investment in research, such as developing electric and lightweight cars, managing traffic flows, and automated electric grids. Just as the New Deal built up the research capacities of the US Forest Service and National Institutes of Health, a Green New Deal should fund research on energy, innovative planning and building design. In brief, by investing public infrastructure, research and planning, a Green New Deal can move a retrograde economy fully into the 21st century in that same way that the New Deal brought it into the 20th.⁷⁸

In the enthusiasm for rebuilding America, it will be good to remember that reconstruction and carbon will have to walk the same fine line as the New Deal in terms of labor and community relations. Unions need to be brought into the planning and operation of public works programs, respecting wage scales, apprenticeship programs and worker safety. At the same time, WPA and CCC type jobs programs for the young and unskilled need to provide for decent wages, fair hiring and safe conditions while aligning with local labor markets. Unions may become uneasy with job relief program, so they will need to be consulted. One in-depth report on labor and climate transition calls for a real "social contract" with unions and communities of color.⁷⁹

Healing the Earth

Climate change goes hand-in-hand with destruction of habitat, ruinous petro-farming and lack of preparation for natural disasters. It cannot be solved without reversing the ordinary habits of contemporary capitalism, including its resource plunder, mining of the soil and short-term vision of profits before sustainability.

Restoration Ecology and Wildlife

⁷⁵ Temming, Maria, "What it will take to adapt the power grid to higher wildfire risks," *Science News*, November 1, 2019.

⁷⁶ Aronoff, Kate, Alyssa Battistoni, Daniel Aldana Cohen and Thea Riofrancos, *A Planet To Win: Why We Need a Green New Deal* (London: Verso 2019). Barker, Lord of Battle, "Post-crisis infrastructure must be built with low carbon materials," *Financial Times*, May 21, 2020.

⁷⁷ Mazzucato 2013 calls this "crowding in" the private sector.

⁷⁸ Inslee 2020.

⁷⁹ Zabin, Carol, Abigail Martin, Rachel Morello-Frosch, Manuel Pastor and Jim Sadd, *Advancing Equity in California Climate Policy: A New Social Contract for Low-Carbon Transition* (Berkeley CA: Center for Labor Research and Education, UC Berkeley, 2016).

The land and waters of the country are in need of a major program of rehabilitation. The CCC planted 3 billion trees and the WPA lined city streets with hundreds of thousands more, and behind this was an array of nurseries and botanists. A Green New Deal will have to send a new CCC out planting billions of trees, as well as thinning and clearing of neglected forests.

As in the New Deal, we will need to expand protected areas, including working agrarian landscapes along with national parks, forests and refuges. Public parks have been shortchanged for years, with massive maintenance backlogs and staff shortages, relying on private land trusts and conservancies to gather funds and donate lands and improvements. The country is crying out for more open space, more recreational areas and especially more city parks and playgrounds.

Setting aside protected areas is a starting point, but serious restoration projects will be needed to bring much of the land and waters back to an acceptable state and restore thriving plant and animal communities. Sophisticated knowledge about ecology, habitat and wildlife will have to be brought to bear across the country, but scientists and experts cannot do the job alone. The need is so great that it will demand mustering mass labor power along the lines of the CCC and WPA.⁸⁰

Reorienting Agriculture

Today's environmental crisis rests heavily on the failures of agriculture, just as it did in the Dust Bowl and cotton fields of the 1930s. The New Deal bailed out and stabilized agriculture, and backed it up with USDA research and extension, but helped usher in an agrarian revolution that has contributed to carbon emissions, land degradation and poor nutrition.

Industrial farming needs a revolutionary shift away from petro-chemicals and intensive monoculture toward diversified, organic methods that restore the soil and stop the slaughter of insects, amphibians and birds. This is especially true of the mass production of meat and dairy that undermines grazing, requires pharmaceuticals, and produces unhealthy meat, milk and eggs.⁸¹

Foodways will also have to change. The New Deal undertook a massive campaign of consumer education that included food preparation and diet, aimed at improving public health.⁸² In the same spirit, a Green New Deal ought to unfurl a campaign to encourage healthier diets, better meat and dairy, and eliminating pesticide, hormone and plastic contamination of foodstuffs.

Responding to Natural Disasters

With rapid climate change, the earth is generating bigger storms and floods, longer droughts and more wildfires, and inexorable sea-level rise will inundate coastal areas. A Green New Deal has to address immediate and long-term threats from a growing wave of natural disasters.

⁸⁰ As suggested by the head of the National Wildlife Federation, O'Mara 2020.

⁸¹ National Research Council. 2010. *Toward Sustainable Agricultural Systems in the 21st Century*. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press. <https://doi.org/10.17226/12832>.

⁸² Cohen, Lizabeth, *A Consumers' Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2003).

The first step is rapid interventions on the lines of today's Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), but with better funding after years of neglect and more readily mobilized labor of the kind the New Deal made available through the CCC and WPA. The second step is to rebuild devastated areas like Puerto Rico and Houston, as the New Deal did for Long Beach and the Gulf Coast.

Third, disaster planning and adaptation need consistent federal backing. Flood control has to be achieved with wider floodplains, restored wetlands and relocated buildings. Wildfire control demands better adaptation to landscape conditions, such as hardened buildings, vegetation control and less urban sprawl. Dams, seawalls and levees all need to be reconsidered in light of climate change.⁸³

Programs for the People

A Green Deal New must address the welfare of the people. A politics of climate change and economic revival alone is too abstract; the people need to see results in their daily lives. The genius of Roosevelt and the New Dealers was to see that.

Rebuilding Failing Places

The geographic universality of the New Deal was one of its greatest contributions. A Green New Deal will need to address the plight of distressed places and help revive them. It must be seen to serve all corners of the country. Not only is geographic universality a way of promoting spatial justice, it gives people who feel abandoned by 'urban elites' a direct sense of participation in renewal of their communities.⁸⁴

To do this requires a combination of targeted investment, job creation, income support, aid to education, land restoration, and more. The key role of small-scale public works in this effort cannot be overstated. A Green New Deal will need to reinvent the equivalents of the WPA, CWA, CCC and NYA. Such programs should not only be about building things; they ought to include community-based projects for teachers, librarians and the like, as the New Deal did.

It should be pointed out that government transfer and aid programs, by their nature, tax urban areas and richer regions more heavily in order to subsidize less favored people and places; the richer areas pay more than they get back, as they should. Unfortunately, most Americans have no idea about this, even the ones benefitting and cursing the coasts. A Green New Deal must make clear to the people how the system works – and how it can be improved upon.⁸⁵

Funding Public Education

Public education is something the American people have fought for since the founding of the country. The New Deal contributed to the high tide of public education by building thousands of

⁸³ Geoff O'Brien, Phil O'Keefe, Joanne Rose and Ben Wisner, "Climate change and disaster management," *Disaster*, vol 30/1, <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/j.1467-9523.2006.00307.x>

⁸⁴ Wuthnow, Robert, *The Left Behind: Decline and Rage in Small-Town America* (Princeton University Press, 2018).

⁸⁵ Investment in depressed regions will need to be increased. Given forty years of cutbacks in federal grants, the only means of equalization between rich and poor states today are differences in federal taxes. Malkin, Israel and Daniel Wilson, "Taxes, transfers and state economic differences," *Federal Reserve Bank of San Francisco*, Dec 2, 2013.

school and college buildings, playfields and other facilities. But the neoliberals have slashed support for schools and higher education since the Reagan administration.⁸⁶

Public education serves three basic purposes. One is to prepare young people for today's workforce, given ever-rising levels of knowledge and literacy. Another is that education is essential the realization of everyone's potential to live a creative and fulfilled life. A third is that educated people make good citizens, as wise leaders from Jefferson onward have realized.

Public education should be geographically universal. Declining areas with poor schools are haunted by the inability of their youth to compete in labor markets and to think clearly about the issues of the day. The alternative is despair, addiction and suicide. Drug abuse is not about the number of pills the pharma companies push so much as it is about the need to numb aching and empty souls.⁸⁷

Free public education at all levels is not pie-in-the-sky; we had it for decades and can still afford it.⁸⁸ A Green New Deal needs to bring it back. This means investing in new school buildings and facilities and providing funding to the states for more teachers at decent salaries – as they have been demanding in recent years.

Improving Public Health & Happiness

Public health was a major concern of the original New Deal and it looms even larger today. Even if the enormous cost and controversy over universal health care should be dealt with as a separate issue, there are ways in which a Green New Deal can intersect with better health.

To begin with, both require taxing the rich to reduce inequality and to generate more revenues for federal aid, including health care. Green New Deal programs to create jobs, raise wages and provide training will help counter the epidemic of drug and alcohol abuse. Cleaning up drinking water and reducing air pollution improves general health; healing the earth and healing the people go hand in hand. Affordable housing is a fundamental need that has fallen short for years in this country, leaving millions of people either homeless, overcrowded or in substandard conditions – all of which contribute to poor health.⁸⁹

There is a clear overlap between geographically universal programs that invest in the revival of damaged places and better public health services to disadvantaged communities. What the country needs is not only Medicare for all but *Medicare for all places*. There should be good access access to hospitals, small clinics and mobile units even in the smallest towns and rural areas, not to mention the poorest urban neighborhoods.⁹⁰

Beyond the basics of public health lies a vast field of potential improvements in the well-being and happiness of the American people along the lines of the New Deal. Efforts to expand parks and open spaces for the good of the earth will need to go along with providing more recreational

⁸⁶ Ravitch, Diane, *Reign of Error: The Hoax of the Privatization Movement and the Danger to America's Public Schools* (New York: Random House, 2013). Christakis, Erica, "Americans have given up on public education. That's a mistake," *The Atlantic*, October 2017.

⁸⁷ Case, Anne and Agnus Deaton, *Deaths of Despair and the Future of Capitalism* (Princeton University Press, 2020).

⁸⁸ The Council of UC Faculty Associations estimates that all higher education in California could be again made free for a cost of ~\$75 per person per year.

⁸⁹ Maddon, David and Peter Marcuse, *In Defense of Housing* (London: Verso, 2016).

⁹⁰ A good start is Governor Tom Wolf's proposed CCC to deal with the Covid-19 pandemic. Meyer, Katie, "Civilian Coronavirus Corps aims to get Pennsylvania back to work," *NPR*, May 8, 2020.

outlets. Creating more public buildings and gathering places will help collective life flourish and build a sense of the commonweal that can help reverse the sense of isolation. Last but not least, art should be available for everyone and in every place, bringing murals, theater and music to the people, embellishing public spaces with beauty and entertainment.⁹¹

Political Renewal of the Nation

The political miasma today is remarkably similar to the one that the New Dealers faced after Hoover's abject failure to respond to the Great Depression.⁹² The New Deal saved the country from fascism in the 1930s and the Green New Deal can save it from the Far Right today, while restoring the institutions of representative democracy and belief in government *for* the people.

Taking Charge, Deftly

Once again, the federal government must take the lead in a project of meeting the crisis on, giving people hope, and offering national renewal and democratic restoration. The times call for a combination of urgency, ambition, and leadership.

Leadership means taking charge of the situation; the government must be seen to be addressing the perceived problems of the people. Yet, good leadership has to be nimble and not locked into an ideological straitjacket, showing that same pragmatism and willingness to try anything as the New Deal.

Finally, leadership means shaping the narrative, appealing to the public directly and speaking clearly without dumbing down the democratic dialogue. FDR gave people someone to believe in and motivated them by hope instead of fear.⁹³

Mobilizing the People

For a Green New Deal to become reality, it will take more than good ideas, good leadership and electoral success. A key lesson of the New Deal is that a transformative regime has to engage the mass of the people, not just convince them that policy makers are working in their interest. This means appealing to working people, not just professional-managerial elites, and not to isolated fractions of working class, whether unions, women or people of color, but everyone.⁹⁴

A Green New Deal must create avenues for people to feel that they are working together with government and that the government is serving the people. Installing solar panels, insulating homes, building schools, planting trees and so on must engage workers as contributors at every scale: saving the earth, rebuilding the nation, and fixing their communities.

At the same time, public mobilization has to include the intermediate levels of government. The New Deal's method of dispersing funds and choosing projects achieved buy-in from states and

⁹¹ On outdoor recreation, public buildings and public art, see Louv, Richard, *The Last Child in the Woods* (Chapel Hill NC: Algonquin Books, 2005); Low, Setha and Neil Smith, Eds, *The Politics of Public Space* (New York: Routledge, 2006); Knight, Cher, *Public Art: Theory, Practice and Populism*, (New York: Wiley-Blackwell, 2008).

⁹² Rauchway, Eric, *Winter War: Hoover, Roosevelt, and the First Clash Over the New Deal* (New York: Basic Books, 2018). Rauchway, "Roosevelt's New Deal offered hope in desperate times. We can do the same now," *The Guardian*, 20 May 2020.

⁹³ Leuchtenberg 1963. Bowie, Jamelle, "DJT is no FDR," *New York Times*, March 27, 2020.

⁹⁴ Frank 2016.

localities. The locals proposed and the feds disposed and local government financial had to make significant financial contributions. Today, state and local governments are mobilized as never before in the face of federal abdication on the Covid-19 crisis, so the time for federal-local partnership is ripe.

Renewing the National Purpose

In the end, Americans want more than slogans; but the popularity of political slogans is not just a matter of catchy phrases or voter gullibility. Slogans speak to the desire of the people to feel a part of something larger, a very general human urge. A Green New Deal offers just such a possibility. It is nothing if not a moral campaign to restore nature, justice and the nation.

Nationalism remains one of the most powerful political forces and people readily answer its siren call. But nationalism does not have to equate with war, conquest and xenophobia. Americans have often been motivated by higher ideals, such as being a nation of immigrants, aiding defeated enemies and marching for civil rights.⁹⁵

A transformative regime must appeal to the best spirits of America, as the New Deal did with its ethical commitment to the common good and public service. That faith has to spread among the people, who want to feel they are bettering the nation and leading the way for the world.

Restoring Democracy

Without basic electoral reforms it is hard to imagine a Green New Deal succeeding. It is well documented how the rich and the corporations use their money to buy elections through advertising, lord over legislators in need of campaign funding and influence policy through paid lobbyists. There have to be sharp limits on money in politics, with strong enforcement.

Reducing the wealth of the very rich is a first step to tamping down on the power of money over elections and legislatures. Taxing the rich more heavily is not just about abstract social justice; it is essential to the maintenance of democracy, which depends on a reasonable equality of property and means to function.⁹⁶

Meanwhile, voting reforms need to be passed immediately. These should include election day registration, mail ballot voting, back-up paper records, minimum distance to polling places, and so forth, as well as the elimination of all bogus restrictions on voting by former convicts.

Conclusion

The time for a Green New Deal has come. Nothing less than a sweeping program of national recovery and renewal will suffice in the face of the massive crisis confronting the United States and the world. Climate disaster is upon us, severe inequality is rotting society from within, and representative democracy is reeling from the blows of a demagogue.

⁹⁵ Yack, Bernard, *Nationalism and the Moral Psychology of Community* (University of Chicago Press, 2012); Fleegler, Robert, *Ellis Island Nation: Immigration Policy and American Identity in the Twentieth Century* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013).

⁹⁶ Mayer, Jane, *Dark Money: The Hidden History of the Billionaires Behind the Rise of Radical Right* (New York: Doubleday, 2016).

Only the comprehensive approach can adequately address the gravity of the challenges facing the nation, as the New Deal proved in the 1930s. A Green New Deal will have to attack climate change across a broad front of programs; rebuild the nation's infrastructure and revive declining areas; put millions to work on useful projects in their communities and regions; and give the people a sense of participation in a the work of reconstruction and modernization.

Right wing critics will try to attack a new New Deal as a "socialist wish list", but the country is in its present parlous state precisely because the neoconservatives and neoliberals have fulfilled their wish list of reversing the New Deal's achievements over the last forty years. Their agenda of tax cuts, deregulation, voter purges, SuperPACs, judicial appointments and obstruction succeeded in so weakening the federal government and democratic control as to render the present incompetent response to pandemic and economic implosion virtually inevitable.

The only sensible response to the meltdown at the top is a program that reverses the decay across the board. This will require practical initiative and experimentation on many fronts at once; it cannot be tentative and fearful of making mistakes, because no one knows the best route out of this mess. Indeed, as the New Deal demonstrated, what is vital is a leadership inspired by a bold progressive spirit and infused with a moral commitment to serve the people and wrest control of the country back from the oligarchs of finance, industry and party politics.

The foundation of any such effort must be the demands of the American public for the government to take action on their behalf. Progress at the top can only come with militant action and protest from below, as we are now witnessing in 2020. Movement at the top and bottom must reverberate off each other, as they did during the New Deal years, with the American public getting organized and finding its voice, the government lending a hand and providing a sense of collective purpose, and the people feeling part of a project of national renewal that is improving their lives in tangible ways.

The core of a mobilized body politic must be the working class, representing four-fifths of the nation and encompassing people all genders, colors and origins. Given the greater oppression and distress of African Americans, people of color and working women, they are surely the ones who will lead any mass upheaval, but that movement has to be in the name of all the common people or the demands for justice and change will break into a thousand ineffective fragments of justice foretold.

The old New Deal had its flaws because it was a creature of politics and improvisation that looks more coherent in retrospect than it did at a time of great uncertainty and profound need. Nevertheless, it is a necessary springboard for talking about the present and a true inspiration for a Green New Deal. Not only does the New Deal provide a host of practical models for things to try out today, it has the outstanding virtue of providing proof that a Green New Deal will work. Against all critics and naysayers is one irrefutable argument: we did it before and we can do it again. There is no time to waste.